

# **Community Views on Criminal Justice: Methodology**

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The Center for Public Safety Initiatives' (CPSI) Community Views on Criminal Justice project examines public perceptions of the local justice system and police-community relations in Rochester, NY. Different stakeholder groups in the community have been interviewed across multiple focus groups so that a cross section of opinions can be described around issues related to procedural justice and police-community relations. This paper will review the methodology for the Community Views on Criminal Justice Project.

### **Background**

The Community Views of Criminal Justice project aims to keep “the pulse” of the current climate of police-community relations. The results are provided to law enforcement and court system administrators to help inform Rochester’s Gun Involved Violence Elimination (GIVE) Initiative. The GIVE Initiative works state-wide to implement evidence-based practices to reduce gun violence incidents, and is funded through the New York State Department of Criminal Justice Services (DCJS). The purpose of the Community Views project is to describe the groups’ opinions and make recommendations to improve relations between the local criminal justice system and community.

The project applies procedural justice theory: that fairness and understanding around the decision-making process will lead to greater compliance with authority. Law professor Dr. Tom

Tyler (2014) describes procedural justice for policing as categorized into four crucial principles:

1. People want to be heard.
2. The authority figure should have objectivity.
3. Citizens want to be treated with dignity and respect.
4. People want to trust the individual officer's intent.

For more information on procedural justice, please see the *Overview of Procedural Justice* paper (Klofas and Smith, 2017) in the Community Views on Criminal Justice series.

## **Methods**

### **Group Feedback Analysis**

This study gathers data on local community members' views of policing and the criminal justice system. Questions in the study are framed around the procedural justice ideas of objectivity, fairness and respect, trust, and the desire to be heard. Each procedural justice element is based on a person's experiences, culture, neighborhood, and other factors. To gauge the opinion of the community on these issues, this study must account for each groups' frame of reference.

A strong methodology for bringing forth different frames of references is group feedback analysis. Group feedback analysis is a multi-dimensional approach to the measurement of attitudes (Heller, 1969). There are three parts to this method: a questionnaire, feedback questions, and discussion. The questionnaires gather quantitative data related to the hypothesis of the study. The second part shows the group results of their questionnaires and poses questions to the group. The third stage uses the discussion to bring forth more in-depth information. The second and third stages assess the meaning of the questionnaire results by exploring why participants answered the way they did and their attitudes towards the topic. The use of group feedback analysis allows

researchers to explore the deeper meaning of why community members believe what they do about police-community relations. In the community views project, focus groups are used to conduct the group feedback analysis.

### **Questionnaire**

Questions in the study are framed around the procedural justice ideas of objectivity, fairness and respect, trust, and the desire to be heard. There are eleven questions clustered into the following categories: interactions with the police, safety, community concerns, trust/respect/fairness, and body-worn cameras. See Appendix A for a list of the survey questions.

### **Sampling**

The Community Views on Criminal Justice project uses group level analysis. Participants of the study are various Rochester city-based community groups that have organized around a shared purpose such as business interests, age-based groups, or a common residential area. Each group is homogeneous in terms of why the participants choose to form a group.

CPSI identified groups to survey then worked with a contact who is part of the group, such as a neighborhood association leader, who then recruited participants to take part in the focus group. Ideally, six to ten people participate in each focus group, and two groups are conducted monthly. Researchers used snowball sampling as needed (recruit multiple groups in each category through outreach with groups already involved in the study). The project aims to have enough groups in each category to compare within the category and across categories on what experiences and circumstances influence different groups' perception of policing and the criminal justice system.

The researchers interviewed various community groups such as police-citizen groups, youth groups, interfaith groups, community organizations, neighborhood organizations<sup>1</sup>, and reentry

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<sup>1</sup> Neighborhood groups are geographically bound (i.e., block clubs, business or neighborhood associations);

groups, among others. See Appendix B for a list of group categories and subcategories the research team intends to recruit over multiple years of this project.

### **Assumptions**

The project is built on three assumptions. First, researchers assume perceptions will vary across groups. Second, words or phrases may hold different meaning to different community groups. Lastly, community views on criminal justice will change over time depending on local or national events and/or policies. These assumptions are important because they present estimates of possible cause and effect relationships that can be explored.

### **Defining Procedural Justice Terms**

As described above, procedural justice concepts are driving the community views project. It is important that the terms are defined. For the CPSI research team, safety is feeling comfortable, a sense of not being harmed physically or mentally. Trust is based on previous experiences and is a willingness to let go of self-protection because of the belief that people will do what they say and consider your best interest. Fairness, dignity, and respect all have overlapping themes like being treated as a human with courtesy, empathy, and value. Finally, being heard means being listened to and understood, and that subsequent actions take into account what is said.

### **Focus Group Roles and Procedure**

Members of the CPSI research team conducted in-person focus groups that include a clicker-based survey using Turning Point technology followed by group discussion. Team members have delegated roles: a lead facilitator, and two notetakers. The lead facilitator is the main speaker driving the focus group. His or her primary job is to lead the overall group discussion, ask questions, and keep the conversation focused in the direction of the desired topic while timekeeping

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community groups have participants from many areas of the city (i.e., reform-advocacy groups or training groups).

for the group. The job of the notetakers is to take thorough notes on everything that is said. The notetaker does not record names or other identifying information. The purpose of having two notetakers is to ensure internal validity of the study. The team also uses an assistant facilitator as needed. This is a transitional role where students can gain experience and confidence inserting probes to help guide the conversation, with the purpose of eventually taking on a lead facilitator role in future focus groups.

The agenda for each focus group is as follows: First, the research team will introduce themselves including their roles, and all participants will share their name and neighborhood. Then the clicker technology is explained to the participants. Next, facilitators ensure the understanding of confidentiality including no personal information revealed in the group will be shared. The formal group process begins with an icebreaker question and practice using the Turning Point clicker technology, followed by a brief discussion to help make the group comfortable with the process. All survey questions with the response options are projected onto a screen and read aloud to participants. Following the survey question, each participant anonymously logs an answer to the question using the clickers to record results. Turning Point software immediately generates a graph of participants' responses to the question which is used for the group discussion.

There are five sections of questions during the focus group session (see Appendix A). Following each section, results of the group responses are displayed and a discussion is facilitated with probing questions that cluster around topics raised by the original question polled. Probe questions are used to ask the group about their meaning of key terms such as "best" or "dignity." Notetakers record the discussion for analysis by the research team.

After the focus group, all team members update, clarify and code notes on the session. Notes are coded under each cluster heading highlighting: key points of the group, whether the

points were group census or individual opinion, direct quotes, surprising elements and a summary of overall feelings and opinions. Within 48 hours of the focus group, the research team meets to debrief and compare coded notes to generate a consensus on themes from the focus group in preparation for writing the report.

## **Reports**

Reports on each focus group highlight survey responses as well as the qualitative results (i.e., the meaning of trust, fairness, respect, and similar topics drawn out of the group discussion). To ensure that each group remains anonymous, individual reports are kept internal to CPSI and are sent only to the group who provided the information. Every three months, a quarterly report is compiled summarizing all groups conducted in the quarter. These reports are circulated to the public, to the groups who took part in the study, appear on the CPSI website, and are provided to justice system administrators (please see working papers, *Community Views on Criminal Justice: Quarters 1, 2, 3, & 4 Reports* for more details).

## **Conclusion**

Procedural justice principles related to policing as well as knowledge gained from other CPSI community research such as the Trust Information Programs and Services (TIPS) initiatives show that citizens' perceptions and feelings towards police greatly influence police-community relations. This project's focus groups will provide meaningful descriptions and context beyond hard statistics. This study addresses a critical gap in the field: data gathered directly from the community. Project reports help provide actionable recommendations for improving relationships between the local criminal justice system and stakeholder groups in the Rochester community.

## Appendix A: Survey Questions

Survey questions with the response options are listed below. Questions are asked in five sections; participants discuss probe questions following each section's survey questions. For a list of probe questions used in this project, contact the authors listed on the cover page of this report.

### Section 1: Interaction with Police

1. Have you had any contact or interaction (by phone, office, car, on the street, etc.) with a member of the Rochester Police Department (RPD) in the past 6 months? (Yes, No)
2. How did the interaction with the police get started? (I called 911 or approached a police officer on the street or elsewhere; A police officer approached me or stopped me on the street or elsewhere; No recent interaction)
3. Would you describe your most recent interaction with the police as... (Good, Bad, Neither good nor bad, I did not have contact with police in the last 6 months)

### Section 2: Safety

4. How safe do you feel in your neighborhood at night? (Very safe, Somewhat safe, Somewhat unsafe, Very unsafe)

### Section 3: Community Concerns and Trust

5. Overall, how satisfied are you with police responses to community concerns? (Very satisfied, Somewhat satisfied, Somewhat unsatisfied, Very unsatisfied)
6. I trust the police to do what is best for the community. (Strongly agree, Agree, Disagree, Strongly disagree)
7. Overall, the criminal justice system (police, courts, probation, prisons, parole, etc.) tries to do what is best for the community. (Strongly agree, Agree, Disagree, Strongly disagree)

### Section 4: Dignity, Respect and Fairness

8. Police officers in my community are generally fair in the way they enforce the law. (Strongly agree, Agree, Disagree, Strongly disagree)
9. The police in my community generally treat people with dignity and respect. (Strongly agree, Agree, Disagree, Strongly disagree)
10. The criminal justice system generally treats people fairly (Strongly agree, Agree, Disagree, Strongly disagree)

### Section 5: Body-Worn Cameras

11. The use of body-worn cameras is good for the relationship between police and this community. (Strongly agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree, Strongly Disagree)



**Appendix B: Types of Groups to Recruit**

<b>Group Category</b>	<b>Group Subcategory</b>
Reentry	Reentry organization staff
	Reentry participants
Youth	At-risk youth organization staff
	At-risk youth participants
	Young people
Community	Training groups
	Reform-advocacy groups
Neighborhood <sup>2</sup>	Neighborhood associations or block clubs
	Business associations
	Community organizers
Police-Citizen	Police Citizens Interactive Committee (PCIC) groups
	Police and Citizens Together Against Crime (PAC-TAC)
	Neighborhood Watch
Faith-based	Churches
	Synagogues
	Mosques
	Coalition groups
Recent Immigrant	Recent immigrants
	Immigrant organization staff
Homeless	Homeless people
	Homeless organization staff
Elders	Elders
	Elder organization staff
Elected officials	City officials
	City Council
	Monroe County officials
Law enforcement	RPD patrol officers
	RPD crime prevention officers
	Locust Club
	Civilian Review Board through Center for Dispute Settlement
	Probation and parole
	Monroe County sheriff and officers

<sup>2</sup> Neighborhood groups have participants who are all from the same geographically-based area of Rochester; community groups have participants from many areas of the city.

**References**

- Heller, F. (1969). Group feedback analysis: A Method of Field Research. *Psychological Bulletin*, 108-117.
- Tyler, T. (2014). What Are Legitimacy and Procedural Justice in Policing? And Why Are They Becoming Key Elements of Police Leadership? (C. Fischer, Ed.) *Police Executive Research Forum*.